



When prevention efforts fail and an oil spill occurs on the water, spill responders must quickly organize and establish incident-specific priorities to focus on the difficult task of cleaning up the spill. Pre-defined roles established by law and regulation and a planned use of the Incident Command System/Unified Command ensure that involved agencies and companies rapidly focus on cleaning up the spill.

Spill Roles and Responsibilities

Oil spill responses can involve a large number of organizations due to the potential for widespread and diverse impacts. Government agencies at several levels may have jurisdiction over different aspects of a spill response. To ensure effective coordination, lead agencies have been designated within the National Response System to coordinate or direct spill response efforts.

While many spills are small and are cleaned up by the spiller under the supervision of local authorities, the National Response System ensures that state and federal resources are available to ensure adequate cleanup on larger or more complex spills. The following discussion focuses on spill responses that involve federal and state responders.

On-Scene Coordinator:

At the federal level, the On-Scene Coordinator (OSC), is an official from EPA for spills in the inland zone and from the Coast Guard for spills in the coastal zone. The OSC is the lead federal official for spill response. The OSC's responsibilities include coordinating all containment, removal, and disposal efforts and resources during an incident, including federal, state, local, and responsible party efforts.

State On-Scene Coordinator:

States' agencies also are key players in oil spill response. States have a position similar to the Federal OSC to coordinate or direct their spill response efforts. State regulations pertaining to response activities may exceed those of the federal government, as allowed by the Oil Pollution Act of 1990.

Responsible Party:

The spiller, or responsible party, has the primary responsibility to conduct spill cleanup, following the procedures listed in their vessel or facility response plan. The applicable plan provides for resources to respond to a worst case discharge from that vessel or facility.

Industry is also required to have authorized and qualified individuals available 24 hours a day to respond to a spill, and to have sufficient funds available to cover the cost of pollution response to the limit of liability for the vessel or facility.

Unified Command:

The federal, state, and responsible party lead officials, because they share the goal of performing a rapid and effective spill cleanup, typically use the Incident Command System, a widely used management system in emergency response communities.

During an oil spill, formation of a “Unified Command” is encouraged to direct spill response efforts, usually made up of the OSC, State OSC, and Responsible Party representative. Unified Command retains the underlying authorities of the federal and state officials, while allowing the unified leadership and creation of a joint incident action plan.

Indian tribal officials, foreign officials, or local officials may have representatives in the Unified Command as appropriate for the specifics of an incident.

Supporting Teams and Special Forces:

In addition to defining the lead agencies in spill response, the National Response System also defines the roles of other agencies, such as those with trustee responsibility for natural resources, or those assigned to the National or Regional Response Teams to coordinate the support of those agencies’ resources to an OSC during an incident.

The NCP also establishes several special teams with specific capabilities to assist in spill response, including specially trained Strike Teams, a Public Information Assist Team, Scientific Support Coordinators, and an Environmental Response Team.

Additional information is available from the sources and contacts listed on the opposite side of this sheet.

In the event of a spill

- Contact the National Response Center at 800-424-8802

Suggested References about Oil Spill Response Roles

- National Oil and Hazardous Substances Pollution Contingency Plan, 40 CFR Part 300, www.epa.gov/oilspill/lawsregs.htm
- National Response Team Website, www.nrt.org